

WALTER J. BLACK

Personal background

First, a few words about Black's background. Walter Joseph Black was born on May 12, 1893 in Brooklyn, New York City, son of Loring Milton Black, a lawyer (1854-1927). His mother was Elizabeth Mahoney Black (1854-1935). Walter was married to Elsie J. Jantzer (b. 1892) on November 6, 1918. They had one son Theodore Milton Michael "Ted" Black, (1919-1994). Ted would later take over the publishing firm.

As the story goes, Walter's wife provided him with the \$600 that he used to start his first venture into publishing.

Work experience

Walter had previous experience with publishing. He worked at Collier's as an editor from 1915. His work for Collier's was very useful to him as a publisher, since they provided him with the stereotyped plates used in many of his books.

Then in 1916-1917, he was Secretary to Colonel George Brinton McClellan Harvey, publisher of *Harper's Magazine*. Walter died on April 16, 1958. His wife followed him five years later.

First efforts of Plymouth Publishing

Black's publishing firm established itself at 7 West 42nd Street in 1923 with a stout one-volume edition of Shakespeare's *Complete Works*, under the imprint of Plymouth Publishing. The name of Plymouth Publishing appeared on only a few volumes before being changed to Walter J. Black Company, then Walter J Black, Inc. in 1925. The Shakespeare volume sold for \$5.45 and had 1,352 pages. It was a resounding success.

The Shakespeare volume was followed in 1924 by a *Complete Works* of Edgar Allan Poe for \$4.95. Known as the Midnight Edition, the ads for this volume claim that it had 2000 pages. It was similar to the previous volume. This was followed in 1925 by a third volume, the *Complete Short Stories* of Guy de Maupassant.

Subsequent collected volumes, first state

In the years that followed, the Walter J. Black Company rapidly rose to a position as one of America's leading publishers of cheap reprints, prices continuing to go down as the variety and popularity of his books increased.

The following is a partial list of the numerous classic reprints that flooded bookstores from 1925 to 1929:

Arabian Nights, Works of Balzac, Balzac's Droll Stories, Boccaccio's Decameron, Poems of Byron, Cellini's Autobiography, Cervantes' Don Quixote, Works of Chekhov, Works of Daudet, Works of Dickens, Dickens' David Copperfield, Dickens' Pickwick Papers, Works of Doyle, Works of Dumas, Works of Emerson, Works of Flaubert, Works of Gautier, Works of Gaboriau, Works of Haggard, Works of Hawthorne, Works of O. Henry, Works of Hugo, Hugo's Les Miserables, Works of Ibsen, Works of Kipling, Works of Maupassant, Novels of Maupassant, Orr's Great Affinities of History, Works of Poe, Works of Rabelais, Confessions of Rousseau, Poems of Scott, Complete Shakespeare, Works of Stevenson, Sue's Mysteries of Paris, Poems of Tennyson, Works of Tolstoi, Works of Voltaire, Works of Wilde, Works of Zola, World's Great Adventure Stories, World's Great Detective Stories, World's Great Romances, The Complete Dictionary.

This list is probably incomplete and only contains those titles I have personally seen. It refers only to titles first published before 1930. Titles often vary slightly and may differ between the cover and the title page.

C. Cancelled volumes

Before discussing the Giant International Series it is first necessary to examine the numerous changes that affected Black's publishing business. Between 1929 and 1938, he added, then cancelled numerous titles, presumably because they did not sell well. Poetry volumes like Byron, Scott and Tennyson were dropped. So were many French works like Gaboriau, Les Miserables, Novels of Maupassant, Mysteries of Paris, and Rabelais.

A set of Dickens' complete novels was published but is now scarce and appears to not have been reissued.

In 1932 a small pocket-sized set was issued. Dubbed "The Companion Classics", these volumes were mostly individual works rather than omnibuses. Here is a partial list:

À Kempis' Imitation of Christ, Essays of Bacon, Balzac's Eugenie

Grandet, Poems of Browning, Poems of Robert Burns, Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, Christmas Tales of Dickens, Dumas' The Black Tulip, Famous Romances, Fielding's Jonathan Wild, France's Thaïs & Sylvestre Bonnard, Franklin's Autobiography, Poems of Gilbert & Sullivan, Harte's Western Stories, Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare, Poems of Longfellow, Melville's Typee, Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, Palgrave's Golden Treasury, Plato's Republic,

Schopenhauer's Wisdom of Life, Poems of Shakespeare, Shakespeare's Hamlet & Other Plays, Swift's Gulliver's Travels, Poems of Tennyson

There are at least 33 volumes (maybe more) in this series. It failed to sell enough copies and was quickly withdrawn. The competition with Modern Library may have contributed to its failure.

In addition to the classics, Mr. Black began to crank out almost innumerable cheap novels beginning in 1929. These were mostly detective novels, with occasional adventure novels, and were mostly by little known authors. There were also some reference volumes. The majority of these are comparatively scarce, and it appears that few of them were reprinted

Copyrights

One of the most confusing aspects of the numerous reprints from Walter J. Black is the lack of any reliable dating. The thirty volumes of "Works" by famous authors that constitute the Giant International Series are entirely composed of stereotyped plates which were used over and over for dozens of printings spanning the 1920's until at least the 1980's. With few exceptions, these volumes, no matter when issued, have exactly the same copyright date.

Most dated volumes have dates ranging from 1926 to 1929. This is the date of the first Black "edition" (of course, none are genuine first editions). The Poe volume is dated 1927 and is different from the 1924 edition, which was never reprinted. Volumes of Maupassant, Flaubert, and Gaboriau are copyrighted by George D. Sproul 1903, 1904, and 1908 respectively and refer only to the copyright of the translations.

Binding styles

Black's popular "Collected Works" from the 1920's came to an end

around 1929, by which time he had published probably 50 or more volumes. Most of these were huge omnibus volumes. With the catalogue full and some titles being dropped, it remained to reprint the more popular volumes.

First issues from 1925-1929 are bound in dark red or maroon leatherette covers, on thin paper with silk bookmarks. Each one bears a frontispiece printed on heavier paper. However, by 1929 a switch was made to a more traditional hardcover binding. All of these have different frontispiece portraits on thin paper. At the same time, copies bound in leather were also available.

Binding variations are so numerous that I will only discuss the more common ones. The early thirties offered two distinct bindings. One of these has an embossed shield device on the cover with the title on the shield in gold. Most of these are bound in dark blue cloth with antique highlights; however, many variations have been noticed, with some bound in brown, red, or green. They are also found in leather bindings.

The second binding was a plain red morroco-grain cloth. The cover was plain with only the authors name in gold. This one was also available in leather. Both of these formats appear to have been in use between 1929 and 1934.

In 1932, a new pseudo-alligator binding was introduced in place of leather, but it does not seem to have been successful, being quickly superceded by other leather styles. This one stood up badly to wear and is therefore hard to find in decent shape.

Another unique leather binding was offered in 1935. This special binding had a decorative embossed cover with red, green, and gold highlights. The cover device showed a Florentine "Medici Crest". Despite the elaboration of the binding, it cost a mere \$1.98. Copies of this version took wear very badly, the color flaking off easily. As a result, well preserved copies are hard to find.

The next change came in with the introduction of a lightweight salmon pink binding. The cover has a circular wreath with the title in the middle. The same binding is also found in leather. At this point the frontispieces were dropped. The date of this style is c. 1935 or 1936. It is the last thin paper edition before the 1938 release of the Giant Internationals.

Changes of address

Dating early volumes is sometimes possible if the title page has an address for the publisher. Leatherette volumes may have an address of 7 West 42nd St. These are not later than 1927. The address of 171 Madison Ave. begins in 1927 and continues in use until at least 1933 or 1934. From 1934, the address is 2 Park Ave. This address continues in use until 1938.

The idea of the Giant International Series

In the 1930's, Book-of-the-Month type clubs were appearing frequently. Initially, Mr. Black had only wanted to release a variety of classic titles (much like Modern Library). But, in time, it appears that he had set his sights on some kind of monthly book club. After more than fifteen years of advertising in countless newspapers and magazines, and having produced hundreds of titles, he pulled together a selection of thirty of his most successful titles and then christened the set "The Giant International Series". This was in 1938, and it would be his most enormous and enduring success.

Beginnings of trademark

According to a trademark filing of October 1, 1938, the name "Giant International Series" was registered to Walter J. Black. He claimed use of the term since October 9, 1937.

The first of the Giant International volumes appeared in two different binding styles late in 1938. Dates were mostly unchanged, repeating the copyrights of 1925-1929 or simply undated. However, a couple of volumes reflect the actual publication date. The Tolstoi and Zola volumes bear the date of 1938 and have an address of 2 Park Ave. on the title page. These are the first issues. After 1938, the address is no longer given.

Binding styles

In launching this new series, Black was aiming at something bigger and bolder than previously, but cheaper than ever. This was no easy matter, and his solution was ingenious. These new volumes, while using exactly the same plates, now were printed on a larger page with bigger margins. The paper was much heavier, but coarser (and cheaper). The result was a large thick book (3" or more) which appeared more substantial without actually having changed.

The bindings came in two styles: standard and deluxe. The standard binding was a red cloth with black panel on the spine. The covers showed an embossed heraldic device with two seated lions (*lions séjant*). This was blind stamped. It sold for as little as 89 cents. There was also a pseudo-antique deluxe binding in dark brown cloth. The cover shows the same lions device, but it is colored with red, green, and gold highlights. It sold for as little as \$1.39.

As an amusing sidelight, the deluxe binding was so successful at appearing antique that it continues to fool unwary collectors. I have seen copies of these books offered for sale as 19th century antiques. One ebay seller even offered the Shakespeare volume as a "rare 18th century" book. Of course, one who is acquainted with typefaces could hardly be fooled.

The Book Club

Once the Giant Internationals were fairly underway, they began to appear in advertisements in numerous magazines. Usually a 25 volume set was shown, and an introductory volume was offered free when signing up for monthly titles on approval. Each month, a new book came in the mail. It was accompanied by a leaflet discussing the merits of the monthly selection. A second leaflet advertised next month's selection which could be accepted or rejected. In all 30 volumes were offered. Incidentally, these advertising leaflets are far scarcer than the books themselves and have independent collector value.

Content changes

A few minor changes in the content of these books from former versions should be noted. The Zola volume was expanded by over 300 pages to include the novel *Nana*. The Poe volume was cut by over 360 pages from the older version. It was formerly almost 1300 pages which proved to be too bulky in the new format. The Shakespeare volume was also 1300 pages, but this one was not cut. The thin paper was retained. No other changes were made apart from cutting a few superfluous fly leaves.

Binding changes

As beautiful as they were, Black's deluxe volumes were simply too

elaborate to keep offering them at \$1.39. The antique style was dropped and an alternative binding was introduced, probably around 1942. This was a pale green cloth with red panel on the spine, lighter weight than previously. The cover is decorated in red and gold, but without the lions. This new design must not have been in use very long, probably cancelled by the end of the war or shortly after. It is scarcer than the two other bindings.

Truncation during wartime

Wartime shortages meant paper rationing. This restriction hit the Walter J. Black Company hard. Not only was Mr. Black using enormous amounts of paper for the Giant Internationals, but he had recently launched two more large series. In 1941 the Classics Club was launched, another Book-of-the-Month type club. This one concentrated on more highbrow classics, including a much wider range of literary types, mostly non-fiction. Then in 1942 he launched the Detective Book Club, a collection of mostly three-in-one detective novels.

There were two choices, either eliminate some titles or cut the page count in some volumes. Black chose the latter option. There was little change in his two newest series. However, as many of the Giant Internationals had a thousand pages, many of these were truncated. All of the titles with 650 pages or more were cut by at least 50 pages, with some cut nearly 400 pages. These cuts saved several thousand pages on each set. Twenty of the thirty volumes were truncated. Only the Dickens volume was altered. *Oliver Twist* was removed and the Christmas Stories put in its place.

Collectors should note that the truncation applies to only the red or green bindings. The Brown antique volumes were cancelled before paper rationing and always have the full text. Red and green volumes that are truncated, for obvious reasons, are worth much less than full texts. They are not only more desirable, but they are also scarcer, especially the green bindings.

Subsequent truncated bindings

By the end of the decade, it was no longer possible to keep producing such large, heavy volumes so cheaply, so a new binding was introduced. The Giant International style in red seems to have been discontinued around 1951-

1952 (green bindings were dropped earlier). The name was also dropped. It was now billed as "The Giants of Literature Series".

The new style was a pale red binding in a smaller size, much like the early, pre-Giant volumes. The spines borrowed a design from the early 1930's. The paper was middle weight and cheap, not slick like the older volumes, but not so thick as the Giants. All of these volumes use the truncated texts, the original texts never being reinstated.

This new series was greatly expanded. In addition to the thirty volumes from the previous series, at least 28 more volumes from the 1932 Companion Classics were resurrected and added to the series. Outwardly they look the same, but the margins are much larger due to the smaller page size of the originals.

Change of ownership and closing

The death in 1958 of Walter J. Black put the company in the hands of Walter's only son Ted. The title pages no longer read Walter J. Black, Inc., being changed to Black's Readers' Service. No further changes can be seen in these volumes except minor changes in the binding cloth a pinkish red shade to a darker red.

It was about three decades before a major change came about, and this would be the last. In an attempt to boost flagging sales, the entire set was reprinted in a pale beige binding with red and gold highlights. The covers were padded and wrapped in vinyl. The tops of pages were covered in gold leaf. This set sold mostly for \$5.00 each.

It is uncertain when the set was finally withdrawn, but it must have been in the 1990's. In any case, the Detective Book Club continued to the end in 1994 at which time Ted Black followed his father in death. The company closed its doors for good.

Note

My apologies for any possible errors in dating. Information on Walter J. Black and his company is rare. Unlike such reprint firms as Random House (Modern Library) and J. M. Dent (Everyman's Library), Black's books are not widely collected (except for the Detective Book Club). Precious little information of any kind is available. Most dates have been divined by a close

study of advertising matter that was placed in magazines over the years. This is not an exact method, and some dates may be off a year or two. In all events, there are no available studies of this subject, and I hope this small contribution might serve to inspire further research.